

The land around Shelby is incredibly diverse. North Carolina itself fosters a multitude of native plants, easily accessed if you know what to look for. Foraging and gathering are both at the core of the practice of permaculture, a set of design principles that are focused on aligning human activity with observed patterns and resilient features in local ecosystems, offering a sustainable partnership, good for humans and their environment alike. It's absolutely a lifestyle, requiring dedication and deep knowledge.

Alex: Hey Karl

Karl: Hi, Alex how are you doing?

Alex: Good

Today, I am speaking with Alex, whose place is Ardea Homestead in Cleveland County, which he runs with his wife Stacy. It's her family's land, and has been so for three generations. There, they forage and wildcraft, grow nutritious food and medicine, raise animals for eggs and meat, and plant a lot of trees.

The fruits of Ardea's labor are making themselves known beyond its boundaries. The Shelby brewery Newgrass sources its wild sumac, which imparts a tart flavor, and balances PH. Native sumac has been used in the area for a very long time, and its recent re-entry to the local palate is a manifestation of western north carolina's food history, and a reminder of how place affects culture, ritual, and tradition.

Alex's last name is Meander, fitting, considering his own winding trajectory, one that has ultimately brought him back to the Southeast. I spoke with him as he wandered the woods on his homestead, sixty acres of field and forest in the foothills of the southern appalachians.

Alex: My name's Alex Alexander Meander and live it already at Ardea homestead sanctuary in rural Cleveland County and we're sort of in a you know with with my wife Stacy and daughter Mesa is not just turned 3 in January and we're sort of been a restructuring phase our business right now as we try to learn how to create business within the family context. Now we have we're sort of shuffling around and figuring out what that's going to be like and in the past hat we've done, which we're taking a break from recently is having a lot of community events here classes on foraging plant identification herbal medicine homesteading skills primitive skills are spaced skills on that sort of thing. We have a presence at the Foothills Farmers Market selling wild foods mostly and we're in the in a place right now. We're trying to see what the future holds as we gear up and get ready to probably in 2021 to start holding some events and classes again.

Karl: Sure. Everything's changed now, hasn't it?

Alex: Yeah, very very much. I mean it's a part of that this year. I started the Ford Sierra program where people go to order allows foods online and come pick them up at the farm with no contact pick up because our Farmers Market was canceled at the beginning of the year at the beginning of the farmers market season due to Covid. So yeah there's been a lot of we were already in the in a sort of restructuring mode before things kind of got haywire in the way that people are interacting and what you know, look at where people feel safe and so it was kind of good in a

way. We were already in that place. So we were already considering not teaching not doing in person, you know classes that groups and stuff. So it's given us another reason to take that break and kind of reflect on what you've done in the past and how we can incorporate, you know our new family in to go see, you know, a toddler and a baby in the way that we do things takes a lot of work.

Karl: Yeah. No kidding.

Alex: We're full on parents.

Karl: Can you talk a little bit about I suppose what local food systems mean to you and then a little bit about what foraging is for those who might not know.

Alex: Yeah foraging is it's kind of a weird term. I actually prefer the term Gathering because in an anthropological sense Hunter-gatherer was the I guess you could say the original human and that was how they procured food was hunting animals and Gathering wild Foods plants around them which at you know, some point or another that was all we ate Foraging textbook definition is when you're actually eating out of the landscape right there. So you don't gather and take it home and, you know, it's sort of like, you know, when you go put your animals out on forage, they're eating as they move and in some ways a lot of cultures all human cultures did that and they did eat as they move but they always did gather some to take back to their fire pits and their Village or whatever it was that they were doing and the modern context emerging generally means Gathering wild foods and the local food Local Food Systems to me it's really complex for me because this is sort of the life way and I want to try to keep this simple for now anyway, Local Food Systems to me like for me, it's actually eating not just what's grown locally but what is there locally. How can you as a human get back to knowing what you can eat around you because we live in a wonderful North Carolina temperate climate that is incredibly abundant. There's fruits and nuts and wild vegetables all year round that we can eat and even in the winter with the mild Winters we have there's still available food and a lot of the nut store really well and there's Wild game so there's really really, you know in some places it's hard to like Alaska. It's a little harder there you have to do a lot of food storage and a lot more hunting in order to procure your foods that actually grow there without your intervention that's kind of big part of it for me. It's a big part of it for me. I also do grow a lot of local foods because they're not as abundant as they used to be based on what I call Landscape mismanagement by modern humans. So my whole context is framed in a way that values traditional life ways and hunter-gatherer lifeways at a time. When I think they're sorely needed and a lot of us, there's a paradigm right now and I rolled it I hope is Shifting where we don't place value on those cultures where we think of the idea of progress is slowly moving away from that we're transcending that but these were also people that don't have the diseases that we have today and they didn't have the depression that we have and they didn't have the anxiety that we have and So we need to look at that also, and we need to weigh the benefits, you know versus the tragedies that we're experiencing today. And that's sort of where I spent a lot of my time is connecting for me local food systems will be looking back to the original local food system and how successful we were because it got us here. We can say that we're better now, but I don't I don't buy it. I'm willing to listen, you know, but I don't buy it and I feel like we got to the place we are.

Karl: It's a lot more than just growing something locally and then inserting that into the local economy as you say, it's more of a life way. I do know that Specifically you grow sumac is that correct? I guess you would gather it, correct And that's used in tandem with one of the local businesses there with New Grass Brewing. Am I right on that and maybe you can explain a little bit about how that works?

Alex: Yeah. I'm not exactly sure what the Brewer there how he uses it exactly. But I know that it goes and beers on my to keep us in some of those more sour beers. It is a sour very solid very acidic. They really like it. It's a native shrub. Of that grows along roadsides and anywhere there's a early secession forest. So you clear cut a piece of land in this area and there's a good chance for the next two or three years are going to start seeing a lot of sumac on the birds will eat the berries and poop them out somewhere and they'll bring you seem like the bee colonies that can be pretty extensive. So you can gather if you find the right spot. You can gather a lot of sumac and a little bit of time basically the berries ripen and usually late summer that are mostly just a dry seed but on that skin there's these little hairs. They impart a tartness, you know, you have to time it really right. You have to get them before the rain washes all these little hairs and that's hard and soft. It's malic acid and some other some other acids in there that create the tart flavor. Another big part of this whole thing for me is, you know stems from nutrition sumac I guess for this familiar with like za'atar spice sumac is an ingredient in that that is a middle eastern species or Mediterranean species. And it was supplanted by lemons by the Romans actually when things started to shift and more colonization was happening in the area and then going up more the transporting goods was happening lemons supplanted sumac as the preferred sour flavor in that area and you catch them, gather them before the rains come and washes it all off very tart. And where I was leading at with the whole story was the antioxidant content the species that is native to the the Middle Eastern areas that has been used for so long is the highest antioxidant containing spice, some people say it's the highest some people say, it's the second highest behind cloves and this is like in the world. So you what you get there is, you know, very at the height of Summer pretty much you're getting this very antioxidant-rich substance that you can use as a spice, or a tea a lot of people make a tea out of it that is one of the uses indigenous people of this area the Cherokee made sumac tea by steeping the berries in water and making us our beverage. So yeah, yeah as the intensity of the sun increases the land often provides you with abundant antioxidants which has been shown to negate, you know sun exposure and things like that. The free radicals that are presented in the case of extended sun exposure can be limited by aronia berries elderberries sumac berries all those like deep summer fruits that come out of the landscape.

Karl: How does it make you feel this history that you're that you're digging into? How does it make you feel to access that history and then also see it represented in the community, And in something like a beer for example?

Alex: Well it obviously feels really good to have, say the wild foods being represented in being known and people in North Carolina live in North Carolina drinking a beer made in North Carolina that you know, one of the main ingredients is wild fruits North Carolina feels great. And at the same time it's sort of like there's there's still something missing from me sometimes

because I want more people gathering at themselves. I want more people to understand the connection to place and culture. And so but you have to start somewhere, you know my whole mission, I guess it all this is to begin to do the teaching and through the offerings to make people aware the abundant food around them because one of the most common questions I get is it that poisonous talking about sumac because of the poison sumac which is a related plant, but the morphology the habitat are completely different the berries aren't even red they're white. And so there's a whole a lot of knowledge has been lost by people and then there's the rumor mill that spreads about plants where people aren't having direct interaction with them. So they're not aware that they're carrying on mythologies about wild foods that aren't really true, you know sort of constantly digging into that with people my ultimate goal though is culture. I think that the modern definition of culture is a little different than what the anthropological definition might be but place the place where you live and the food that grows there those two things are going to create your rituals. Your stories and everything creates your culture. They're going to create the things that you do every day because most of the time in a culture like that, you're spending a few hours every day gathering your food and you're telling your stories and your ritual so bringing it back around to a place where having an awareness about how important it is now doing it. Just that we're aware of how important it is to try to manifest that in a try to hold that you know, it's and it's an intergenerational thing. You can't make big leaps like that to a what I call a holistic culture in one generation.

Alex: If there's anything about North Carolina, and Cleveland County in general it's the land. You know I was born in Georgia and I lived there most of my life I guess half my life now and I lived in the mountains of Tennessee and went out west to Washington state and lived there for about a year. And then I got homesick, and I remembered very specifically that I heard thunder. And you don't hear thunder usually in the Pacific Northwest and I realized things were happening to me and I ran back to North Carolina and went to herbal medicine school. That's where I met my wife, Stacey, and moved onto land with her. Probably about 9 months after we met I moved onto land, this is her family's land. And yeah, started doing this together through herbal medicine, foraging and trying to create community, in a sense that you're on this land and we're still working on that part and mostly North Carolina has such a diverse landscape and people can be really amazing too and out here there's abundant land, topography, wildlife, in the right places and the animals are animals I always felt very drawn to, the box turtle and the blue herons. So it feels like home more than any other place. And I'm big about place I'm big about home. I didn't used to be, I've been very transient. Over time there was a home sickness. And I think that's very important for us to think about. Because, culture, like I was talking about. At one time all of us humans originated in indigenous culture. So most of us, if culture evolves out of a place then we're homeless. We don't know where we come from, we don't know the stories of our ancestors. And I think the best thing a lot of us can do is figure out where that is. Where we want to be, where we want to live. Know it really well, learn things about it, and pass it on. I chose North Carolina, I chose Cleveland County.

Karl: Thanks for stopping by. Join us next time to learn where your path might cross with North Carolina's Main Streets.

